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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6521
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0312
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7296
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5409
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3937
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1228
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 4006
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3092
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7888
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5542
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0342
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2234
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001048

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
MCC FOR D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/27/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PHUM MOPS CE

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION RALLY DRAWS SIGNIFICANT CROWD AND
GOVERNMENT ATTENTION

REF: A. COLOMBO 1020

¶B. COLOMBO 883

Classified By: Acting DCM Michael DeTar, for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On July 26, the newly formed United National Party/Sri Lanka Freedom Party-Mahajana Wing alliance, now called the National Congress, held its first public rally at Colombo's Hyde Park with the theme "Country is ruined. Come forward." Rumors that the Government would try to prevent potential protesters from reaching the rally proved to be untrue. Several alliance leaders addressed an enthusiastic crowd and encouraged others to join them in defeating the Rajapaksa regime. Our contacts tell us this rally helped create momentum for the new UNP/SLFP-M alliance, and that they expect to see more support for the group emerge. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On July 26, the newly formed United National Party/Sri Lanka Freedom Party-Mahajana Wing alliance, now called the National Congress, held its first public rally at Colombo's Hyde Park. The event, named Janarala or People's Wave, featured the theme "Country is ruined. Come forward." Estimates of attendance vary widely, but most observers agree there were at least 50,000 protesters involved. Most participants were UNP members, but observers estimate that at least 10 percent were SLFP members. Some Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and Ceylon Workers Congress members also participated.

¶3. (C) Rumors that the Government would try to prevent potential protesters from reaching the rally proved to be untrue. Some claimed the Government had fabricated stories about security threats to scare away potential participants, including the announcement that a lorry and car packed with explosives were located in Colombo. We also heard that the Government planned to close all major roads into Colombo for "road repairs" to prevent additional participants. However, participants told POL FSN that the police were actually quite

helpful throughout the day as the procession made its way to the main rally point, and there were no security incidents during the rally. The Government's only response was to hold its own series of smaller meetings throughout the city and in Nuwara Eliya, Gampaha, and Matara, Mangala Samaraweera's home district.

¶4. (C) Several alliance leaders addressed an enthusiastic crowd. Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe repeated the now-familiar charge that the President had come to power illegitimately through a secret deal with the Tigers to prevent residents of the North and East from voting. He commended the stand taken by SLFP-M leader Mangala Samaraweera in leaving a corrupt government. Samaraweera apologized for brokering a deal with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to support President Rajapaksa in the 2005 election, and invited the JVP now to join forces with the National Congress. UNP National Organizer S.B. Dissanayake invited other SLFP members to join with the SLFP-M in toppling the Rajapaksa regime. SLFP-M co-founder Sripathi Sooriyarachchi spoke about the money the Rajapaksa campaign reportedly gave the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) just before the 2005 election, and highlighted other illegal transactions the President's brother Basil had allegedly negotiated. Other prominent parliamentarians who spoke included Western People's Front MP Mano Ganesan and UNP Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Spokesman Ravi Karunanayake.

¶5. (C) SLFP Provincial Council member Ruwan Kulatunga told POL FSN that the rally helped create momentum for the new UNP/SLFP-M alliance, and that he expects to see more support for the group emerge. He said SLFP participants were enthusiastic about the rally and happy to have a safe venue

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to voice their discontent with the SLFP Government. Minister of Transport Dullas Allahaperuma told POL FSN that the Government is taking the new alliance seriously and sees the National Congress as a formidable opposition group. He conceded that the SLFP now regrets the loss of Samaraweera and Sooriyarachchi. Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremayake said publicly yesterday that the opposition had a right to protest if they disagreed with the Government's policies, and that the only way to win the confidence of the people is to develop the East.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The last rally of this size in Colombo was the UNP's rally in 2005 to demand that former-President Kumaratunga step down and allow elections in 2005 instead of 2006. Yesterday's rally was perhaps even larger, and even more significant, because of the participation of a significant number of SLFP members. It seems clear that the government now faces a more cohesive, determined and vibrant opposition than it has had to deal with since it took office. It is also apparent, in retrospect, that the government's popularity peaked several months ago, early in 2007, and is now on the wane. The UNP/ SLFP-M strategy is calibrated to deprive the government of a parliamentary majority by the time the budget must be passed in October-November. It will likely take several more weeks, however, to determine whether the new grouping has developed the momentum to induce other small parties to desert the governing coalition, or to attract a sufficient number of crossovers from the SLFP parliamentary delegation.

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